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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore how career counselors and coaches can identify and honor resistance as they assist and guide individuals and groups in the process of change and transition. The author explores what can cause/lead to resistance, what the effects are and what can be done about it. (GCP)

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Dealing With Resistance in Career Coaching/Counseling

by
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Chapter Six

Dealing With Resistance In Career Coaching/Counseling

Deeta Lonergan

Have you ever reached the point with a career counseling or coaching client where they seemed to be "stuck" even though they had made a decision and developed a plan of action? They resisted the next step. Perhaps you tried the cheerleader approach to dealing with resistance – encouraging them to take the next step. Assuring them that everything would be OK, yet they still resisted. Perhaps you ignored the resistance and expected the client to continue to progress. Gestalt theory honors resistance and views it as healthy and an essential part of the change process.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how career counselors and coaches can identify and honor resistance as we assist and guide individuals and groups in the process of change and transition. We will explore what can cause/lead to resistance, what the effects are and what we can do about it.

Gestalt Principles Of Resistance

Gestalt theory asserts that where there is a driving force for change, there exists a complementary force against it. Resistance is not an absence of energy rather it is energy; interest or drive in a different direction.

When consciously chosen, resistance is healthy. It should be respected, not regarded as alien and needing to be destroyed. Resistance serves the functions of defense, protection, healing and creation. Resistance is necessary for self regulation; without it people and organizations cannot maintain their boundaries. Resistance is a label applied by managers, coaches or consultants to the perceived behavior of others who seem unwilling to accept influence or help. It is a label provided by those who see themselves as agents of change and not necessarily the experience of the targets. Resistance may be the intervener blaming the client for the intervener not knowing what the client needs.

Gestalt theory assumes that resistance is a healthy state (if we are aware of it) as well as an obstacle. It can be viewed as a manifestation

of Multiple Realities or a need/energy in a different direction. Resistance can be a strategic "wake up call." Working with resistance rather than fighting or ignoring it increases everyone's chances of getting their needs met. Respecting resistance can build stronger relationships.

The Cycle Of Experience

The Gestalt cycle of experience has seven stages: sensation, awareness, energy, action, contact, closure and withdrawal. An example is:

Sensation	— There's rumbling in my stomach.
Awareness	— I'm hungry.
Energy	— Go to the refrigerator and look for food
Action	— Choose some fruit
Contact	— Eat the fruit.
Closure	— Hunger pangs are gone. Feel satisfied.
Withdrawal	— Return to previous task or new task.

Three Primary Reasons For Resistance

There are three primary reasons for resistance:

1) The individual views change differently from the change agent.
2) The individual is expressing his/her normal, healthy fear of the unknown.
3) The individual disagrees substantially with the specifics of the proposed change.

Gestalt Resistances

Gestalt theory defines six different kinds of resistance: desensitization, introjection, projection, retroflection, deflection and confluence.

DESENSITIZATION - "Numb" or "Checking Out"

When individuals are experiencing resistance due to desensitization they are numb to their surroundings. They have "checked out," ignoring what's happening. They lack awareness, sharpness and distinctiveness. There are gaps in their sensory ground. They are not taking in any data on their environment.

INTROJECTION - "Swallow it whole"

With introjection the individual takes in information from the environment and swallows it whole without differentiating and assimilating it. They passively incorporate of what the environment provides— food, ideas, values, beliefs, etc.

PROJECTION - "Playing a movie"

When projection occurs the individual attributes his/her own behavior, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, etc. to another -- which is actually experienced as directed towards self from the environment. He/she blames others. There is no data.

RETROFLECTION - "Energy turned in"

When retroflection is the form of resistance it is characterized by compliance; "shoulds" and "oughts" are dominant. The client doesn't speak up. He/she wants to take action, but doesn't. Energy is turned inward.

DEFLECTION - "Raise the shield"

In deflection the individual lowers or reduces contact by shifting attention or being indirect. Nervous laughter occurs. He/she changes the subject; doesn't complete a unit of work.

CONFLUENCE - "Where is me - where is you?"

In confluence there is a merging or joining of boundaries to avoid distinction or differences. Everything runs together. This form of resistance is characterized by sameness. There is good contact, but no boundaries.

Paradoxical Theory Of Change

The Gestalt approach supports staying with resistance as a tactical matter. A person or system cannot move from one state of being to another until the present state is fully experienced and accepted. Recognizing, honoring and dealing with resistance supports moving through the process of change and transition.

7 ASSUMPTIONS OF PRODUCTIVE CHANGE

(adapted from *The Change Leader* by H. B. Karp)

1) Change is best facilitated by developing ownership in the change process.
2) Change will occur most easily in an atmosphere of enlightened self-interest.
3) People do not resist change; they resist the pain or threat of it.
4) People actually tend to resist the opposite of change which is boredom.
5) Power is the ability to get what you want; resistance is the ability to avoid what you don't want. Resistance is a subset of power, not

of change.

6) Resistance is best dealt with by honoring it rather than suppressing, avoiding or minimizing.
7) People can work best with others' resistances by first understanding and accepting their own resistance.

Techniques For Working With Resistances

Desensitization

Increase the amount of sensing; fully develop interest and awareness in/with small chunks of information.

Introjection

Scrutinize assumptions and beliefs, especially those that are implicit and historical. Explore the consequences of forming different expectations; identify and accept what is present. Separate "I" from "you," "they," "it," etc. Question the logic: "This is the way we always do it."

Projection

Increase the responsibility for individual actions, thoughts and feelings; increase the use of "I" as opposed to "you"; turn "you should" into "I should," "I want," "I need." Ask, "What is your role?" "What do you contribute?"

Retroflection

Encourage more action; provide a base for small action steps. Uncover inhibitions to action; exaggerate inaction. Stay on the topic; meet the situation directly. Point out when issues get deflected. Help uncover issues that block contact.

Confluence

Develop clear boundaries; heighten similarities and differences. Develop awareness and "ownership" of differences and support.

Key Questions For Moving Through Resistance

- What would be your first (or next) step?
- Where is the potential for resistance?
- What resistance do you see or anticipate?
- How would you handle or prepare yourself for it?

Coaching And Resistance: Some "Rules For The Road"

- Contract clearly up front with each party involved and be prepared to review your contract during the process.
- For both coach and coachee: stress "Awareness, Awareness, Awareness."
- Covet your curiosity, cultivate the merging of multiple realities into a shared reality.
- Questions are usually better than answers.
- Pay attention when there is no resistance at all.
- If you preach, be a model of what you preach.
- The process will go only as fast as each level of system will allow. Be aware of where the resistance is.
- Heighten the resistance by highlighting needs in the other direction.
- Ratify units of work completed and celebrate them.

Summary And Conclusions

Gestalt theory asserts that where there is a driving force for change, there exists a complementary force against it. Resistance is not an absence of energy—rather it is energy, interest or drive in a different direction.

When consciously chosen, resistance is healthy. It should be respected and explored not regarded as alien and needing to be destroyed. Resistance serves the functions of defense, protection, healing and creation. Resistance is necessary for self regulation; without it people and organizations cannot maintain their boundaries.

Resistance can be a strategic "wake up call." Working with resistance rather than fighting or ignoring it increases everyone's chances of getting their needs met. Respecting resistance can build stronger relationships.

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